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ABSTRACT

Relationships between parental overprotection and fifth-graders' self-concept and level of social and school functioning were examined by means of systematic observations of parent-child interactions in the home, parent and child self-reports, teacher and peer ratings, grades, and achievement scores. Subjects were 43 middle-to-upper-middle income Caucasian families in a Vermont suburb. A total of 35 of the families had 2 adults in the home; 8 had 1 adult at home. Findings indicated that parental overprotection was significantly related to defensive and provoking behaviors in children, and to low self-concept and school functioning. Parental overprotective behaviors were negatively related to children's academic achievement. Results for the effects of parental overprotection on children's social functioning appeared to be mixed, depending on the source of information. Mothers displayed significantly more overprotective behaviors than fathers. No differences in level of overprotective behavior with respect to the sex of children were found. It is concluded that parental overprotection appears to be a meaningful predictor of children's self-concept and social and school functioning. (RH)

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PARENTAL OVERPROTECTION: EFFECTS ON SELF-CONCEPT AND SOCIAL AND SCHOOL FUNCTIONING

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between parental overprotection and fifth grade children's self-concept and level of social and school functioning, as measured by systematic observations of parent-child interactions in the home, parent and child self-reports, teacher and peer ratings, and grades and achievement scores. It was found that parental overprotection was significantly related to defensive and provoking behaviors in children, as well as to lower self-concept and school functioning. Results for the effects of parental overprotection on children's social functioning appear to be mixed, depending on source of information (peer ratings vs. self and teacher ratings). Sex differences in parents' level of overprotective behavior were found, with mothers displaying significantly more overprotective behaviors than fathers; no differences in level of overprotective behavior with respect to the sex of children were found.

Parental overprotectiveness has been implicated as a causal factor in child psychiatric disorders, as well as certain physical illnesses, despite the paucity of empirical support for this stance. The general focus of the literature tends to be on internal dynamics rather than on external systems -- i.e., parental overprotection is discussed in terms of underlying personality characteristic, temperament, and individual development rather than in terms of child-parent, child-family, and/or child-society interaction. The focus is also on the effects of maternal as opposed to paternal overprotection. In addition, a majority of the studies appear to be retrospective, thus allowing more opportunity for bias through faulty recall, or judgment colored by the subjects' present situation and relationships with their parents or children. Further, most of the studies examine only the relationship between parental overprotection and psychiatric disorders, and not of examining its effects on normal development. Finally, these studies tend to use paper-and-pencil measures only.

The present study investigated the role of parental overprotectiveness in relation to children's self-concept and social and school functioning. It attempted to improve on the deficiencies of previous research by 1) focusing on parent-child interactions, rather than individual internal dynamics; 2) including fathers as well as mothers; 3) obtaining present-day observational and self- and other-report data, rather than depending on subject recall; 4) using a multi-method, multi-measure approach, rather than simply paper-and-pencil reports.

In addition, the study examines parental overprotection in relation to normal development and functioning within a non-clinical population.

METHOD

When clinical observations, literary descriptions, and factor-analytic studies are all considered, there is a general consensus in defining parental overprotection as involving infantilization, encouragement of dependency, and the prevention of independent behavior in the child. We operationalized parental overprotection in several ways: (1) we selected the following behaviors from direct observations of parent-child interactions: precautioning, limiting, moralizing, correcting, and answering for child behaviors; (2) we clustered two series of items from a parent interview, one of which asked parents to rate how strict or permissive they are in eleven domains (e.g., who the child may have as a friend, and how the child spends his/her money) and the other (7 items) asking where the parents think their children should learn about issues such as sexuality and wise management of time, with parents, school, and child's own experience as choices; and (3) we selected two items from a child self-report scale of parent behavior which involved the child's leeway to make his/her own decisions.

The outcome variables, child's self-concept and social and school functioning, were measured by the following: (1) Direct observations of child-to-parent behaviors in the home, particularly, child's monosyllabic, noncompliant, stalling, defensive, and provoking behaviors; (2) The Bronstein-Cruz Child/Adolescent Self-Concept Scale, which includes the subscales of Self-Evaluation, Social and Peer Relations, Family Relations, Sense of Mastery, and Emotional Well-Being/Distress, and the

following subscales of Harter's Self Perception Profile for Children: Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Behavioral Conduct, and Global Self-Worth; (3) Teacher's ratings of the child's classroom behavior; (4) Peer ratings indicating the child's popularity; and (5) school grades and achievement scores.

Subjects were 43 Caucasian, middle-to-upper-middle income families of fifth graders (26 girls, 17 boys, mean age 10 1/2), in a suburb in northern Vermont. Thirty-five of the families had two adults living in the home (biological mother and father, or mother with step-father or male partner), and eight had one adult (mother). Family interaction was observed and tape recorded by trained field workers on six occasions, and sessions were later transcribed from the tape and coded according to specific behavior categories. The above mentioned paper-and-pencil measures were administered on two additional visits.

RESULTS

Among other results, it was found that parental overprotective behaviors, as measured by direct observation, were positively related to child's stalling, defensive, and provoking behaviors ($p<.01$), and negatively related to children's monosyllabic and compliant behaviors, self-evaluation, social and peer relations, teacher ratings, and grades in work habits and social-emotional functioning at school ($p<.05$). These findings are presented in Table 1.

Parental overprotective behaviors, as measured by parents' self-reports, on the other hand, were positively related to ratings of children's popularity ($p<.05$). These findings are presented in Table 2. Parental overprotective behaviors, as measured by children's reports, were also positively related to peer popularity ($p<.05$), and negatively related to self-evaluation, sense of mastery, total self-concept, academic grades, and grades in social-emotional functioning in school ($p<.05$). These findings are presented in Table 3.

T-tests demonstrate that mothers were significantly more overprotective than fathers ($p<.05$), as measured by direct observations of several mother-to-child and father-to-child behaviors. Parent sex differences were not found for the other measures, however. There were no significant differences in parental overprotectiveness related to the sex of the child.

TABLE 1

Correlations of Direct Observation of Overprotective Behaviors with Child Behaviors, Self-Concept, and Social and School Functioning

	Parent Behaviors		
	Parent Overprotective 5-behavior cluster	Father	Mother
Child Behaviors			
Monosyllabic Responses	-.34	-.38	
Comply	-.34		-.43
Stall	.56	.50	.45
Defensive Defend Self Defend Other Complain	.65	.31	.74
Provoke Shows Aggression Challenges	.40	.30	.39
Child Self-Report			
BC Subscales:			
Self-Evaluation	-.27		-.28
Social & Peer Relations	-.30		-.28
School Reports			
Teacher Ratings	-.31		-.32
Grades for Work Habits	-.30	-.36	
Grades for Social-Emotional Functioning	-.32	-.39	

$p<.05$

TABLE 2

Correlations of Self-Reported Overprotective Parent Behaviors with Peer Popularity

	Self-Reported Overprotective Parent Behaviors
	11-Item Cluster
Peer Report	
Popular Chosen as a Best Friend	.26
Popular Combined three categories	.35

$p < .05$

TABLE 3

Correlations of Child-Reported Parent Overprotective Behaviors with Child Self-Concept, and Social and School Functioning

	Child-Reported Overprotective Parent Behaviors
	2-Item Cluster
Child Self-Report	
BC Subscales:	
Self-Evaluation	-.42
Social and Peer Relations	-.38
Family Relations	-.30
Sense of Mastery	-.36
Emotional Well-Being	-.51
Total Self-Concept	-.50
Harter Subscales:	
Scholastic Competence	-.31
Social Acceptance	-.30
Behavioral Conduct	-.39
Peer Report	
Popular Chosen as a Friend	.31
School Reports	
Grades for Social-Emotional Functioning	-.35
Overall Grade	-.33

$p<.05$

DISCUSSION

Parental Overprotection, as operationalized in this study, appears to be related to children's self-concept and social and school functioning, although not always in the directions that were predicted. It was hypothesized that parental overprotection would be negatively related to self-concept and social functioning. Results indicate that parental overprotection, as measured by observations, is related to lower self-concept and social functioning, as measured by children's and teachers' reports. However, parental overprotection, as measured by parent self-report and child report, is related positively to social functioning, as measured by peer report. The different findings may be due to the different perspectives of the measures, e.g., how children feel about themselves and what teachers observe may be different from what classmates feel about the target child. It seems more likely, however, that this discrepancy may be due to the differences in predictor measures, in that they are tapping into different aspects of parental behavior.

Contrary to what was hypothesized, parental overprotective behaviors were negatively related to children's academic achievement. It has been assumed that children of overprotective parents would be more dependent, and thus more concerned with fulfilling their parents' expectations for academic achievement. However, such children did not appear to be dependent, and in fact exhibited noncompliant, assertive behaviors; also, it may be that such parents do not have high expectations for academic achievement. In addition, it may be that the poor self-concept

of these children affects their performance in the academic area.

As hypothesized, mothers' and fathers' overprotective behaviors differed. This difference, which emerged in the observations of direct father-child and mother-child interactions, confirms and extends previous findings in the literature in that mothers spend a greater proportion of their time with children on caretaking activity, whereas fathers spend a greater proportion of time in play.

Contrary to expectation, parental overprotection did not differ with sex of child, though the literature on parenting behavior would suggest that parents would be more protective of daughters than sons. It may be that such sex differences emerge with infants and young children, but not at this age -- which may change as the children enter and progress through puberty.

In conclusion, parental overprotection appears to be a meaningful predictor of children's self-concept and social and school functioning. We need to keep in mind, however, that in the present sample, these particular "overprotective" behaviors are also correlated with punitive and restrictive parental behaviors -- and it may be that it is negative parental behavior in general which is the most meaningful predictor of negative outcomes for children. In terms of further research, it would be beneficial to examine how much parental overprotection predicts child's self-concept and social and school functioning above and beyond negative parenting. In addition, given the mixed results, it seems necessary to have a better or more consistent operationalization of parental overprotection, although the multi-perspective approach is also important.